

## *Touched*

### **Sophie Couldrey**

My artwork 'Touched,' a story of "The Rape of Nanjing" was the focus of my final art piece this year. It underlines political issues in democratic countries, where having freedom of speech and expression is a basic human right. The capacity to openly express ourselves and voice our minds and opinions is critical for societal progress. I am passionate about world history and from research; I came across the Second-Japanese Sino War (Rape of Nanjing, Nanking Massacre, December 1937). The story left me saddened by the atrocities that took place and I was horrified by the Japanese Government and their part in trying to hide and deny the Rape of Nanking. Their story deserves a voice. I discovered Zhang Xiuhong's horrific experience and story during the massacre. Xiuhong died at the age of 90 (2016). Before her death, Xiuhong left a testimony for China's first documentary about Nanjing Massacre survivors, in which she revealed her painful memory of rape by Japanese invaders when she was only 11 years old. Scarred, both physically and mentally Xiuhong's voice comes through in my artwork.

"Touched" is a multi-media sculpture, mortalised into a life size model of a little Chinese girl and a Japanese soldier. I chose to present my artwork as a body of work as the two pieces work together to tell the story. Inspired by Ai Wei Wei's approach on societal metaphors, where he creates installations on an epic scale, I wanted to produce an art piece that reflected a similar scale. Wei Wei has been under house arrest even beaten by police as he is viewed as a 'threat' to a 'harmonious society.' His works can be beautiful, challenging, thought provoking and still tell the truth. The abuse and rape of young girls was unnecessary and is an important part of history to tell. I know and understand that as a privileged Australian, I have freedom of speech. I have the ability to interpret this story on a visual platform, without severe consequences, therefore my intention was to create an artwork that expressed Xiuhong's and other victims' stories to make society aware of the actions the Japanese took during the war. After viewing Li Zijian's three metre long painting of 'The Nanjing Massacre' I realised I wanted to capture the story from a three-dimensional focus, moving away from two dimension. Zijian's work comprises realistic bodies, piled on top of one another, demon starting people battling against cruelty and death. I wanted my story telling to skew between evil and innocence lost.

I focused on what perception I wanted for the Chinese girl sculpture, making it clear that she appears tiny, in comparison to the Japanese sculpture, emphasising how much he towered over her, with a pointed 'rusted' brown finger. I also wanted to highlight the innocence of a defenceless, small child. The soft material was purposeful as I chose to make the armour out of soft cushioned material to represent that she is vulnerable, with nothing to protect her. Before choosing the fabric for my final piece, I tested a variety of materials. From doing this, I found that I needed something that was thin enough to stitch with embroidery thread, but thick enough to hold shape when sewing pieces together. I ended up choosing green fabric, similar to hessian but with a tighter weave, making a sturdy thickness to stitch with. To express the story, each flower that covers the dress is indigenous to China and has sentimental meaning to the child, such as the plum blossom, which represents strength and endurance. Depicting children, as flower buds waiting to bloom and blooming from adversity was intentional.

My artistic intention is not to overshadow the true events and embroidering with traditional Chinese stitching techniques allowed me to connect traditional stitching with contemporary practices of local textile artist's, Sera Waters and Jo Fife. My initial inspiration for the sculpture came from traditional Japanese Samurai armour. I wanted this armour to tower over the Chinese material armour and have a strong, masculine appearance, whilst featuring symbolic Japanese designs. I started by researching samurai armour and deconstructing each component. This was an important process as it helped me to understand how the armour came together.

Initially, I had gained ideas from Japanese artist Makaon's can creations, however after testing his technique I found that cans were too flimsy for the scale of sculpture I wanted to create. After further research, I discovered thicker rolls of aluminium from Bunnings, than regular tin cans. Explicit experimentations lead me to realise the thick aluminium was the most suitable material to use. I sculpted the soldiers face with a menacing scowl, to demonstrate the fear they inflicted on their victims.

To highlight culture, I embossed traditional Japanese designs on to the metal plates, drawing direct inspiration from Pewter artist Ninette Kruger. Kruger includes textured details into her works. This is where I discovered an embossing technique when pressing a pen too hard on the metal, which left an imprint. I trialled it with Japanese designs and found it an effective way to add texture to the armour. To enhance both sculptures as one complete work of art, I displayed them together on a large stand. I made the decision to hang the embroidered Chinese 'armour' on a cross-made from bamboo, which is symbolic to Chinese culture. The Japanese soldier stands behind the material laden Chinese armour, pointing to her shoulder, peering down at her. When the two pieces come together, it expresses how small and defenceless the Chinese girls were against Japanese troops.

This body of work is my personal interpretation of their beauty and innocence, taken away so forcefully by Japanese troops during the Nanjing massacre. The reason the rape of Nanjing continues to play a huge role in modern China is that there are still Japanese historians and politicians who deny that it happened, or actively try to minimise the scope. I challenged my own practices and created a thought-provoking art piece. My role as the artist in society was to tell their story. I believe I stayed true and thoughtfully captured the 'The Rape of Nanjing' in my three-dimensional creation, where I brought together traditional and contemporary art and craft practices.